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ABSTRACT

For the second language student, proficiency is a measure of what tasks can be accomplished with acquired language and how well they can be accomplished. The necessity for specification of functional proficiency arose, and resulted in the publication of guidelines by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)'s guidelines delineating functional proficiency in five areas: speaking, writing, reading, listening, and culture. This represents a paradigm shift, as communication has become the focus of language instruction. Applying instructional systems design to a proficiency oriented foreign language program is discussed in terms of the following guidelines: (1) use the ACTFL proficiency guidelines; (2) write specific performance objectives and criterion referenced test items before developing instruction; (3) make the classroom learner-centered; (4) integrate instructional materials and media; and (5) evaluate the program: both formative and summative evaluation can improve the effectiveness of foreign language instruction. (Contains 12 references.) (MAS)

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Proficiency Orientation in Foreign Language Education: Implications for Instructional Design

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What is Proficiency?

In second language education circles for the past ten to 15 years, the word "proficiency" has generated considerable debate and controversy. The word does not simply represent "a quality or state of being proficient," as Webster (1993, p. 931) would have it, but instead has become a synonym for the proficiency movement or the shift toward proficiency-oriented instruction (Birckbichler & Corl, 1993). This movement and mode of instruction are at the heart of the paradigm shift the second language community has undergone that closely mirrors general trends in education toward holism and constructivism.

For the second language student, proficiency is a measure of what tasks can be accomplished with acquired language and how well they can be accomplished. The task can be registering for a hotel room or ordering a meal in a restaurant, and the "how well" is not only receiving the room and meal intended, but also understanding associated cultural and sociolinguistic connotations of these communicative events. Such an accomplishment may seem the logical outcome of any second language program, however, this was not the case prior to the adoption of proficiency-oriented instruction.

Most programs dating back at least 10 or so years, (and actually many still today) focused more on the structure of language; not necessarily on what you can do with it. The teaching methods employed paralleled those generally used in education at the time: reductionistic, structured approaches emphasizing behavioral objectives, or as Higgs (1984) described them, a "marriage of linguistic (structure) theory and learning (behavior) theory "(p. 2).

The audiolingual method was a common technique. Students repeated, and committed to rote memory, isolated words and phrases. Audiolingualism closely paralleled the instructional systems design (ISD) field's method of programmed instruction. The methods were adopted from B.F. Skinner's theoretical work in behaviorism and systems approaches. Programmed instruction reduced tasks to small components, provided learners frequent feedback, and defined specific measurable objectives which could be readily assessed (Seels, 1989). This method was widely used in military training which, in turn, significantly influenced the civilian foreign language community.

The structured approaches revolved around the linguistic elements, specifically grammatical, phonological and syntactic features of language--elements readily and reliably defined. Evaluation was typically accomplished using discrete-point tests with completion or multiple-choice questions on grammar (Liskin-Gasparro, 1984). While such methods allowed inexperienced teachers to teach large numbers of students, students often were unable to transfer knowledge outside the classroom; in a foreign language sense, they were functionally illiterate.

In the late 1960's an evolution toward communicative approaches began. The objectives of these approaches are to target a task, such as obtaining a hotel room or ordering a meal, and gaining the level of communicative proficiency necessary to successfully complete the task. This paradigm shift necessitated specification of functional proficiency, a job undertaken by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. Results of this effort were the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, published initially in 1982 and revised in 1986, and the adoption of proficiency-oriented methods on a broader scale.

The ACTFL guidelines delineate functional proficiency in five areas (speaking, writing, reading, listening, and culture) at five levels (novice, intermediate, advanced, advanced plus, and superior), with the novice and intermediate levels further categorized as low, medium or high. The example below is the guideline for speaking, intermediate-mid level:

> Able to satisfy some survival needs and some limited social demands. Is able to formulate some questions when asked to do so. Vocabulary permits discussion of topics beyond basic survival needs such as personal history and leisure time activities. Some evidence of grammatical accuracy in basic constructions, for example, subject verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, some notion of inflection.

The guidelines are intended to be descriptive, but their inherent hierarchical structure often encourages prescriptive use. Higgs (1984) refers to the guidelines as "the organizing principle" (p.4), and Liskin-Gasparro (1984) identifies the guidelines as "a graduated sequence of steps that can be used to structure a foreign language program" (p. 11). The guidelines are not the driving force behind the proficiency movement, but a component that has simplified the process of operationalizing proficiency-oriented methods.

This is a paradigm shift in the true sense of the word, as communication has become the focus of language instruction which is where, in my opinion, it should belong. However, as previously mentioned,

not everyone has adopted proficiency methods; many programs and individual teachers still focus on grammar translation.

Applying Instructional Systems Design to a Proficiency Oriented Foreign Language Program

Many in the foreign language community have dismissed instructional systems design (ISD) as being able to make a contribution to their field. This may stem from the fact that ISD is rooted deeply in Skinner's work and behaviorism, and that it may not be "politically correct" to hold behaviorist philosophies. However, for a couple of reasons, ISD can be of great value in designing a language program.

First is the unfolding of the proficiency movement. It has often been left up to the individual instructor to incorporate the tenets of proficiency into instruction. The individual instructor can use systematic ISD to appreciably aid in the selection, application and optimization of instructional goals and methods. A second reason is the ever increasing availability of emerging technologies. Success or failure of any technological aid, such as computer assisted language learning (CALL) or interactive video instruction (IVI), will have less to do with what it can do than what we are actually doing with it (Underwood, 1984). Here again, ISD can aid integration and optimization.

The remaining portion of this paper provides five general guidelines which can help in designing a second language program. These are guidelines for anyone working to develop a language instructional program, which can include an instructional designer working with a subject matter expert (often the linguist or language teacher), or the second language teacher as well. Many of these guidelines are just basic common sense, but following them without skipping any of the steps is a way to improve an existing program or develop a new one. The guidelines closely mirror the steps in the ISD process: the steps, as defined by the Dick and Carey (1990) model, and how they are supported by each guideline, follow. Lastly, these guidelines are primarily for the instructor-led classroom.

Guideline 1 - Use the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. Analyzing and identifying instructional goals is simplified by the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. They delineate functional orientation and specific accuracy levels in each of the five areas of reading, writing, listening, speaking and culture, serve as goals for courses and individual lessons.
They are often overlooked, but a good deal of effort went into their development, and they can provide a solid reference point for the first three phases of the ISD process.

ISD Step: Identify Instructional Goals - The guidelines provide a ready made set of specific instructional goals. Obviously, the goals of the program being designed may will likely not match perfectly, but if the focus is proficiency oriented, or perhaps more specifically focused on writing, speaking or another skill, the guidelines do provide a good starting point. The basic guidelines can also be applied to specific content area of instruction, such as an English for Special Purposes program that teaches how to complete a job application, if this is the focus.

ISD Step: Conduct Instructional Analysis - Most language use requires gaining some verbal knowledge (vocabulary) followed by a knowledge of structure or a grammatical rule (or an intellectual skill) in order to properly use the vocabulary. Most lessons developed will follow this pattern. Further analysis should focus on the type of communicative skill in which proficiency is desired, and on the specific content of the lesson.

ISD Step: Identify Entry Behaviors and Characteristics - The guidelines state specifically what learners should be able to do after instruction. Omaggio (1984) stresses the value of the guidelines hierarchical form:

> The guidelines are (also) ideally suited for organizing instruction because they are progressive. Knowing what competencies lie at the next level will help us sequence materials to conform to natural developmental patterns in adult second-language learners and prepare them for making progress. The descriptions will also allow us keep in mind the ultimate goal(s) learners hope to achieve. (p. 44).

The hierarchical nature of the guidelines indicate what skills should be achieved at Novice (low, medium, high), Intermediate (low, medium high), Advanced/advanced-plus, and superior. Prior to designing instruction at a particular level, the previous level should be achieved as entry level behavior.

Guideline 2 -Write Specific Performance Objectives and Criterion Referenced Test Items Before Developing Instruction: Matching test items with instructional goals has been one of the most problematic areas of language programs. Basic ISD practice, however, can help alleviate this problem, particularly if the goals have been clearly delineated as discussed above.

ISD Step: Write Performance Objectives - Using the skills identified in the instructional analysis, performance objectives that indicate the conditions and criteria that are required of the learner should be prepared. These conditions should include what information is to be given to the student beforehand, what type of skills (oral, written, etc.) will be expected, and specific criterion on the structural accuracy required. For example: "When given a written scenario in which two people interact, the learner will write a Russian greeting and form of address of the appropriate formality. Items must be spelled correctly." These items again closely reflect the ACTFL guidelines, but will make it clear to the learner what performance is expected, and make it easier for the instructor to develop the instruction and evaluate the student.

ISD Step: Develop Test Items based on the Objectives - Student evaluation should be criterion referenced, though there is a tendency to compare student performance.

Also on testing, Liskin-Gasparro (1984) recommends specific assessment objectives based on the three elements of the guidelines, which define functions the speaker can express, the content of those functions, and the degree of accuracy. The last function, accuracy, can be evaluated in typical discrete point fashion, however, recall that the proficiency movement emphasizes moving instruction away from linguistic structure. The focus is thus on the first two areas, function and content.

The most obvious method to test an acquirer's proficiency or communicative competence is with an oral interview, which measures both aural comprehension and speaking ability. Krashen and Terrell (1983) recognize the value of lengthy oral interviews, however, they also recognize that conducting such interviews with large classes may not be feasible. A possible solution is testing supported by CALL, which can reduce the interface time between student and instructor. Students viewing video or text can be tested for aural and reading comprehension, and can also be tested for writing in the target language by producing summaries. The instructor's time with each student is significantly reduced as only speaking abilities need to be evaluated during oral interviews.

Guideline 3 - Make the Classroom Learner-Centered:

ISD Step: Develop Instructional Strategy. The Proficiency means that students must practice the skills that they are to attain. This means that they, not the instructor, should be the focus of any language program. A variety of activities that require student performance, small group work that increases their opportunities and reduces anxiety, and making lots of input, at the appropriate level, available, are strategies to be considered.

An argument may be made that the more learner-centered the classroom, the weaker the notion of controlled, criterion based objectives. Learner-centered does not necessarily mean that learners can go off in any direction they see fit, but instead means that they should be active participants. Students listening to a dialog between the teacher and one other student should be minimized. While an acceptable balance must be found, the more the students participate, the better.

Guideline 4 - Integrate Instructional Materials and Media:

ISD Step: Develop and Select Instructional Materials. Effective use of materials in a proficiency-oriented environment is another significant problem facing language educators today. The quantity and quality of available resources, particularly those that are technology based, vary significantly between languages.

Selection of materials should begin with a comprehensive review of instructional goals (which level of proficiency), the strategies selected, and all materials available for the language selected. Materials that support proficiency-based instruction, such as newspapers, television broadcasts, and films, should be considered as they provide input variety and authenticity. Textbook use should be limited to those that have evolved from grammar-based to functional/notional-based, as available. Second language teachers, in a survey by Birckbichler & Corl (1993), cited "goals stated in terms of communicative functions" as the most critical factor in textbook selection. Other important factors noted in the survey included varied activities, contextualized exercises, and adherence to ACTFL proficiency guidelines for topics and sequencing. Instruction often closely adheres to specific texts, which despite the proficiency movement are linguistic structure oriented (Birckbichler & Corl, 1993), and do not allow for any supplemental activities.

Due to the flood of new technology based materials, primarily CALL and IVI, particular care should be taken when selecting and incorporating them into a program. The issues to consider include what levels of language acquisition are best served by CALL or IVD, determining the correct mix of language lab

and classroom time, and obtaining software and materials matching curricula. The approach generally used in second language, as with academic fields outside of second language, has been to use CALL/IVD applications to fill gaps in curricula. Integration must begin with strategically placing CALL/IVD where it is most efficient. Video segments and hypertext exercises must be carefully matched to course objectives, student abilities and interests, and to other classroom activities.

A basic approach is to use the level of the language acquirer to determine how much technology to use. In the early stages of language instruction, in which the lexicon must be the focus (Higgs, 1984), along with orthographies in some languages, CALL/IVD applications serve to link lists of vocabulary to context. Hypertext and hypermedia incorporate embedded strategies not typically utilized in other disciplines, such as chunking/clustering and frequent short periods of review (McCoy & Wieble, 1983). They can also provide appropriate sequencing and short video clips to provide context. Instructors need not rely strictly on the CALL/IVD application. Providing vocabulary lists and themes in advance and follow-up by shaping classroom activities around lab work will enhance acquisition.

The early stages require the greatest degree of independent effort as insufficient lexical development precludes communicative activity. Otto (1989) believes this is where the concentration of CALL/IVD applications should lie, but often does not. Krashen and Terrell (1983) identify a period early in the acquisition process, the silent period, in which acquirers say very little except for memorized whole sentences. During this period they are building the confidence and the lexicon necessary to produce language. Larger proportions of time devoted to independent CALL/IVD activity during the silent period help focus on aural activity and reduce anxiety producing oral production. Independent activity in the early stages will also improve attitudinal factors.

At intermediate levels, increasing the quantity and quality of input to support expansion of vocabulary is the focus of strategy when designing instruction. Dick and Carey's (1990) strategy of organization is most appropriate at this level in a proficiency- based curriculum. Presenting vocabulary in functional or topical subsets creates a framework for classroom activity. For example, with the theme of ordering a meal in a restaurant, food can be a subset around which numerous activities can be developed.

Interactive programs should be combined with paired or small group work, with functionally based content. CALL/IVD applications play an obvious role at this level, but they cannot stand alone. Follow-up with classroom discussion of the events of the video, strictly in the target language, will assist in long term retention and encoding. Intermediate levels should also provide opportunity to demonstrate proficiency with simulations and questioning about similar personal experience.

Advanced levels of language study require a lower proportion of CALL/IVD centered activity due to the level of technology presently available. As real interactivity cannot occur, the genuinely communicative work required at this level must be left to the classroom. Input is still crucial, however, and video, news broadcasts and printed media still serve a substantial role.

Guideline 5 - Evaluate Your Program: Both formative and summative evaluation can improve the effectiveness of second language instruction.

ISD Step: Conduct Formative Evaluation - Formative program assessment should be conducted continuously, modifying methods and activities, updating materials and adding new materials that will maintain motivation. Brierly & Kemble (1991), recommend establishing a lifecycle that continuously analyzes instructional systems to determine if curricular, teacher and student requirements are being met.

An approach modeling Dick and Carey's (1990) three phases of formative evaluation are also useful. One-to-one and small group evaluations can insure that instruction is interesting and motivational. The third phase, the field trial, in which students are placed in realistic situation, mirrors the goals of proficiency orientation. Setting up situations in which students practice language will assess both the student's acquisition and the effectiveness of the instructional program

ISD Step: Conduct Summative Evaluation - Summative evaluation may prove problematic as an outside evaluator, normally an instructional designer, will likely not have acquired the language being instructed. This lack of knowledge complicates the process as the evaluator is not able to judge the effectiveness of instruction. In such cases, the evaluator must work closely with the designer and the teacher to determine deficiencies in outcomes.

Summary

These basic guidelines can provide the language program developer or teacher with enough knowledge of basic ISD methodologies to enhance program development. As previously stated, many of the guidelines are just basic common sense, but following them without skipping any of the steps is a way to improve an existing program or develop a new one. Using a systematic and systems process will improve the chances that established goals can be successfully reached.

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